

DETROIT

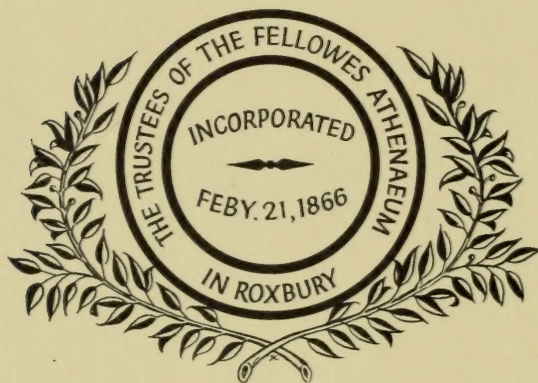


PISTONS



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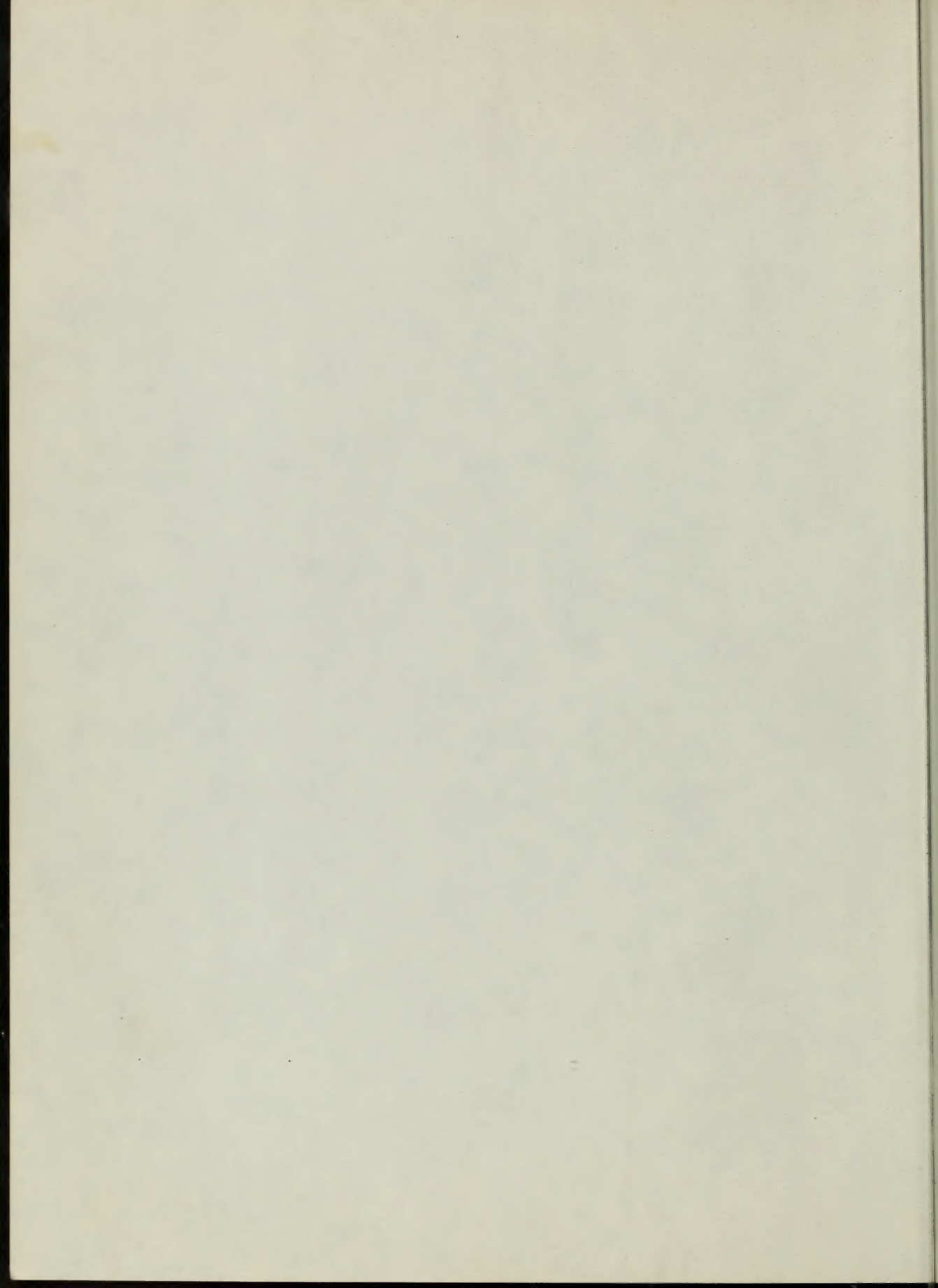
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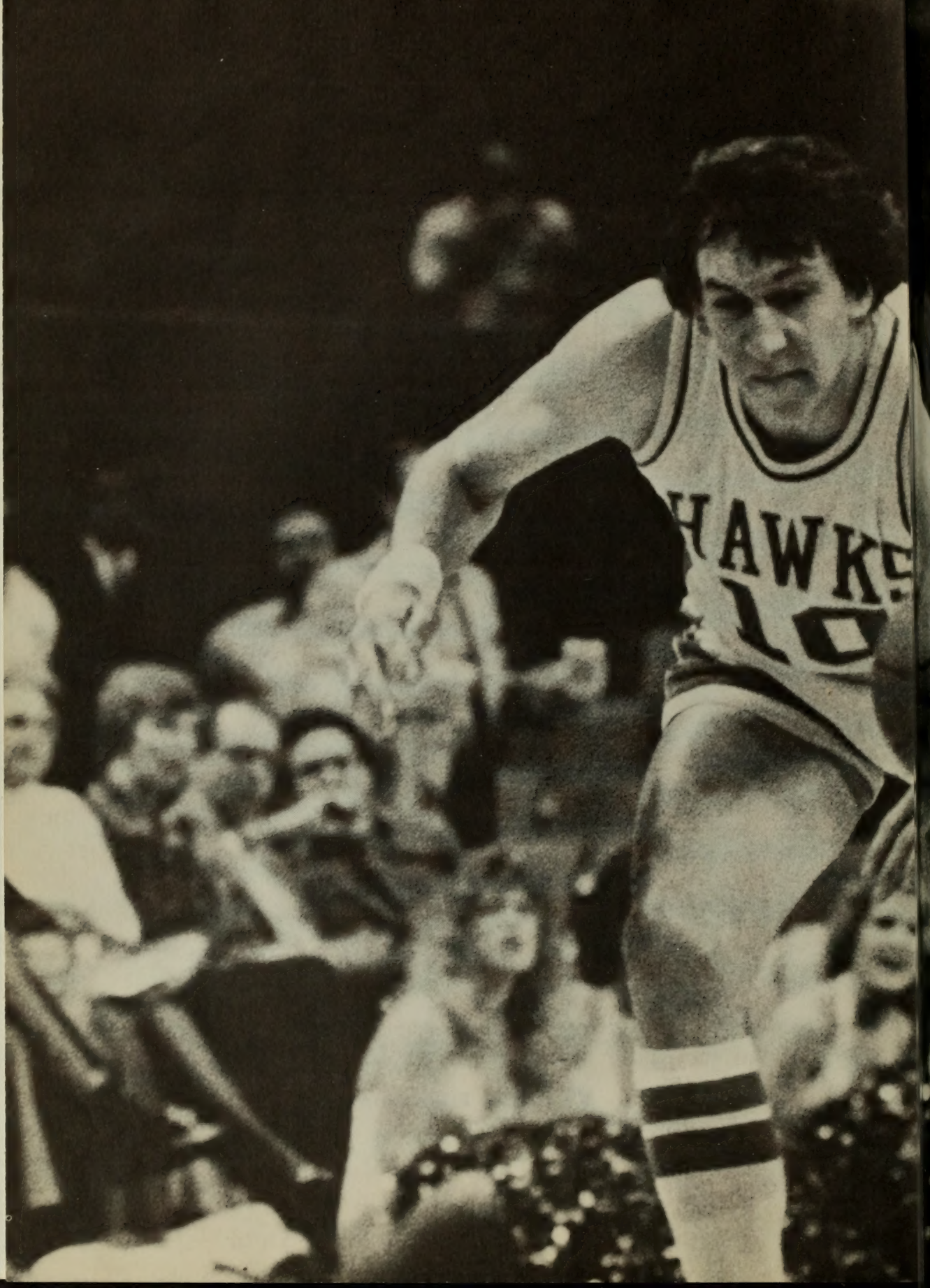
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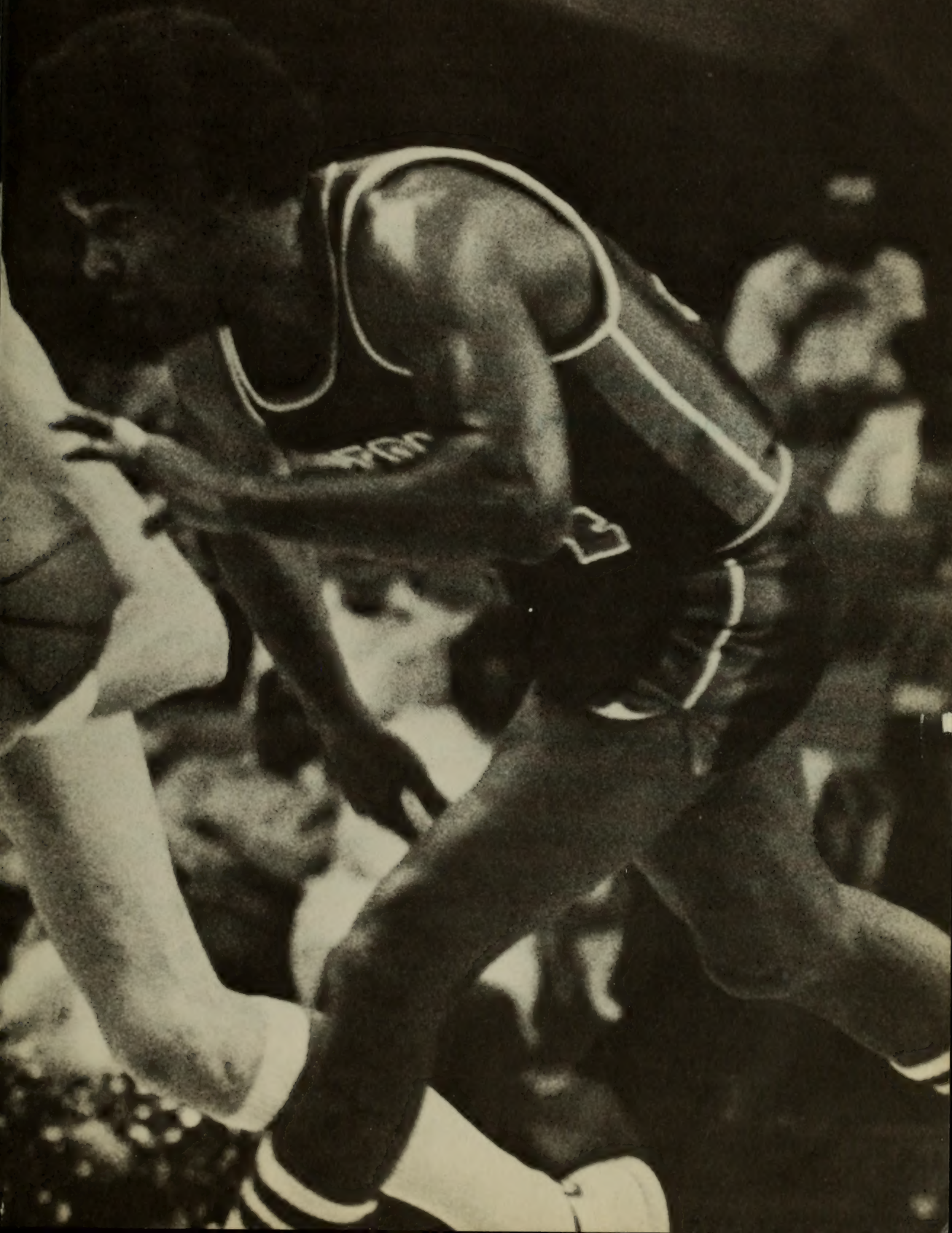


DETROIT PISTONS

By Jim Moore



Piston Steve Hubbard (34) outhustles Steve Hawes (10) of the Hawks in an air-tight match in Atlanta. (1982)



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DETROIT PISTONS

SIX MILLION FANS. Over the past 26 years in Detroit, nearly 6,000,000 fans have attended the Pistons home games.

INTRODUCING. . .
A GRANDDADDY OF A TEAM!

For the past 30 years the Detroit Pistons have sent thrill after thrill up the spines of pro basketball fans throughout the country. Sure, the Pistons have had their share of disappointments. But today the team finds itself on the verge of greatness. How did it happen?

Before we get ahead of our story, let's go back in time. Let's take a look at some of the legendary "movers and shakers" who helped lay the foundation for today's outstanding club.

You'll meet Fred Zollner, a lovable guy who was the team's first owner.

You'll discover how the Pistons got their unusual nickname. And how they got their start in little Fort Wayne, Indiana.

Coaches? We'll introduce you to some of pro basketball's very best, including Ray Scott and Herb Brown.

Naturally, though, a team is only as good as its players, and the Pistons have had their share of great ones. You'll meet the



The great Walter Dukes (20) pulled down nearly 5,000 rebounds for the Pistons during the late 1950's, a skill he perfected as a standout collegiate player for Seton Hall. (1953)



At a 1974 news conference Fred Zollner (r), the factory owner who had started the Piston team back in the 1930's, announces his decision to sell the franchise for more than eight million dollars.

ZOLLNER FINALLY SELLS. *Fred Zollner, the man who started the Pistons in 1937, finally sold the franchise to a group headed by Bill Davidson. The sale took place in 1974 — 37 years after the team was founded!*

one-and-only Dave DeBusschere, a fascinating athlete who couldn't choose between his two loves — baseball and basketball.

Then you'll meet Dave Bing, a sure-handed guard who terrorized the league with his deadly set-shot. And, of course, you'll come face-to-face with big Bob Lanier, a man who will go down in history as one of the NBA's most powerful forces.

But first. . .

THE BIG Z

The Pistons got off to a roaring start in the old industrial league, way back in 1937. That was a good eight years before the National Basketball Association was even formed.

Fred Zollner was the man who planted the seed that would soon sprout into a league power. Fred owned a factory that manufactured pistons, so it's easy to see how the team got its name. Like the employees in Fred's factory, the early Pistons on Fred's team were hard workers. In no time at all they proved that they were clearly the class of the industrial league.

SOME CAREER. Bob Lanier is the Pistons' all-time leader in scoring, scoring average, field goals, rebounds and blocked shots!

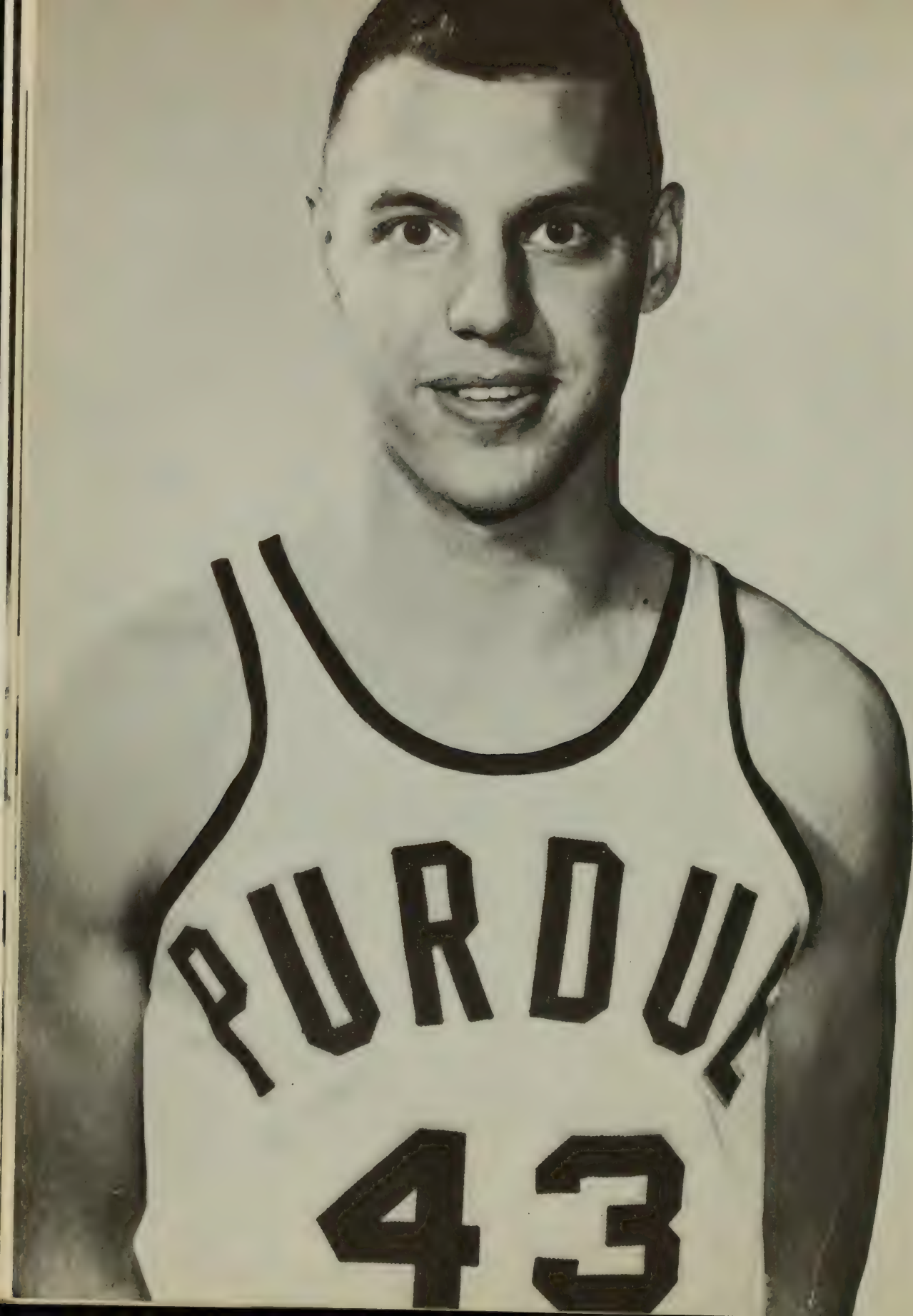
"We rarely lost," smiled Fred. But that was a problem. "Since we were playing against other factories, we were making enemies instead of friends."

This situation bothered Zollner, so he finally decided that his team should "go pro." In 1941, the Pistons officially joined the National Basketball League. And, since Zollner's factory was located in Fort Wayne, the team was naturally christened the Fort Wayne Zollner Pistons.

For the next four years the team dominated the NBL. Then, in 1949, the Pistons stepped up in class to the NBA. There, faced with tougher competition, Fred's team faltered and fell. But old Fred wasn't worried. You see, Fred Zollner was the kind of guy who maintained faith in the people around him. This, in turn, inspired those people to work even harder for Fred. At his factory, for example, not one of Fred's salesmen had ever quit or been fired in a 35-year period!

Now, however, Fred was faced with the uncomfortable task of making necessary changes in the Piston lineup. Still, every





PURDUE

43

COACHES APLENTY. Since the Pistons moved to Detroit back in 1957, the team has had 16 head coaches!

move he made was for the good of the league. During the NBA's start-up period Fred had lent the league large sums of money to keep it afloat. Now, he allowed kids to attend the games for free. He even gave them prizes for finishing the sentence: "I like the Pistons because . . ."

As far as Fred was concerned, the fans always came first. When he hired coach Charley Eckman, Fred asked him to spend 15 minutes before each game explaining pro basketball to the Pistons' fans. Unfortunately, very few fans showed up. The truth was, little Fort Wayne simply could not support pro basketball. Finally, in 1957, Fred moved the club to the big bustling city of Detroit, and it has been there ever since.

In Detroit Fred hired a new coach. His name was Charlie Wolf.

"Charlie is just the kind of take-charge guy I've been looking for," said Fred.

Wolf took over in 1963 and tried everything in his power to turn the team around. Conditioning was at the top of the list. He

SORRY, DAVE. Dave DeBusschere held the University of Detroit scoring record until a deadeye guard took it away from him. The culprit? A fellow Piston — John Long!

led his players in calisthenics and urged them to climb stairs instead of taking elevators. Despite Coach Wolf's impressive leadership, however, the Pistons continued to falter.

Just when things looked hopeless, Zollner made another bold move that changed the fortunes of the team. This time he chose none other than Dave DeBusschere, a popular player on the team, to coach the club.

DEBUSSCHERE TAKES OVER

Dave DeBusschere was a local Detroit boy made good. He had joined the Pistons as a player in 1962. Though he certainly wasn't the flashiest player in the league, Dave rolled up his sleeves and worked hard. He was an unselfish player who set screens, moved to open spots and banged the boards. Best of all, he played hard-nosed defense, which was something the Pistons had been sorely lacking.

DeBusschere had grown up in Detroit, where he had been a high school star in both basketball and baseball. He was so good at both sports that when the time came for Dave to turn





BINGO! Dave Bing is the Pistons' all-time leader in free throws and assists. He ranks just behind Bob Lanier in scoring, plus Bing rates in the Pistons Top-10 in 10 out of 11 categories!

pro, he couldn't choose one sport over another. In the winter he played pro basketball for the Pistons. In the summer he pitched for the Chicago White Sox. He continued to participate in both sports until the Pistons hired him as coach in 1964. At the time, DeBusschere was only 24-years-old. This made him the youngest coach in professional sports!

DeBusschere stayed with the Pistons until 1968 when he was traded to the New York Knicks, not as a coach but as a player again. Oddly enough, Dave learned of the trade while hanging Christmas ornaments on his tree at home. What a Christmas present!

The Detroit fans were saddened by Dave's departure, but it marked the beginning of a whole new era for basketball in their city.

BING JOINS TEAM

Dave Bing came out of Syracuse University with high expectations for himself — and he certainly lived up to them. He was an instant sensation with the Pistons, who needed a lift. More

BIGGEST VICTORY. In 1969, the Pistons thumped the Chicago Bulls 158-114 to record their largest victory margin ever. It was matched four years later when they defeated Kansas City, 144-100!

important, he would stay with the team for many years to come.

Bing averaged more than 20 points a game in his rookie season. The following year (1968) the Pistons made the playoffs for the first time since 1963 — and it was obvious that Dave Bing had a lot to do with it.

“Give me one man like Bing,” said legendary Celtics coach Red Auerbach, “and I’ll build a championship team around him.”

Consider the record. In his nine seasons with the Pistons, Dave made the club’s all-time leaders in 10 of 11 categories, including the Top-10 in points, scoring average, games played, field goals attempted and made, free throws attempted and made, rebounds, assists and steals!

“You can’t open up a man’s chest and see how big his heart is,” said Auerbach, “but I know there’s a big one beating in Bing.”

As good as he was, however, even Bing could not carry the team singlehandedly. The Pistons were lacking in the trenches. With Bing roaming the backcourt, they still needed a big man





BEST OF THE BEST. Bob Lanier received plenty of awards during his great career, but the one in which he took special pride was the Most Valuable Player award he received in the 1973 All-Star Game held in Seattle.

who could score, rebound and defend upfront. They were bound and determined to find a quality center. Big Bob Lanier was the perfect candidate.

BIG BOB IN THE MIDDLE

In the late 1960's, Bob Lanier had been a big man playing for a small college. He had been all-everything for St. Bonaventure, a tiny school of 1,800 students, tucked away in western New York. Their nickname was the Brown Indians, and Lanier was definitely the chief of the tribe.

Lanier certainly had the bulk to be a commanding center, even in the land of the giant pros. In top shape Bob stood 6-foot-11 and weighed 275 pounds, but he had trouble staying at this weight. He claimed he ate only one good meal a day, but there were at least 16 little meals he probably wouldn't tell you about.

Though Lanier was a snack freak, he was also a tremendous athlete. Perhaps the best part about big Bob's game was his silky-smooth shooting touch. Whether it was a long-distance

TWO CHAMPIONSHIP RINGS FOR CHANEY. *Assistant coach Don Chaney, a 12-year veteran and former Celtics great, earned two NBA Championship rings as a player. His next goal: To win his first championship ring as a coach with the Detroit Pistons.*

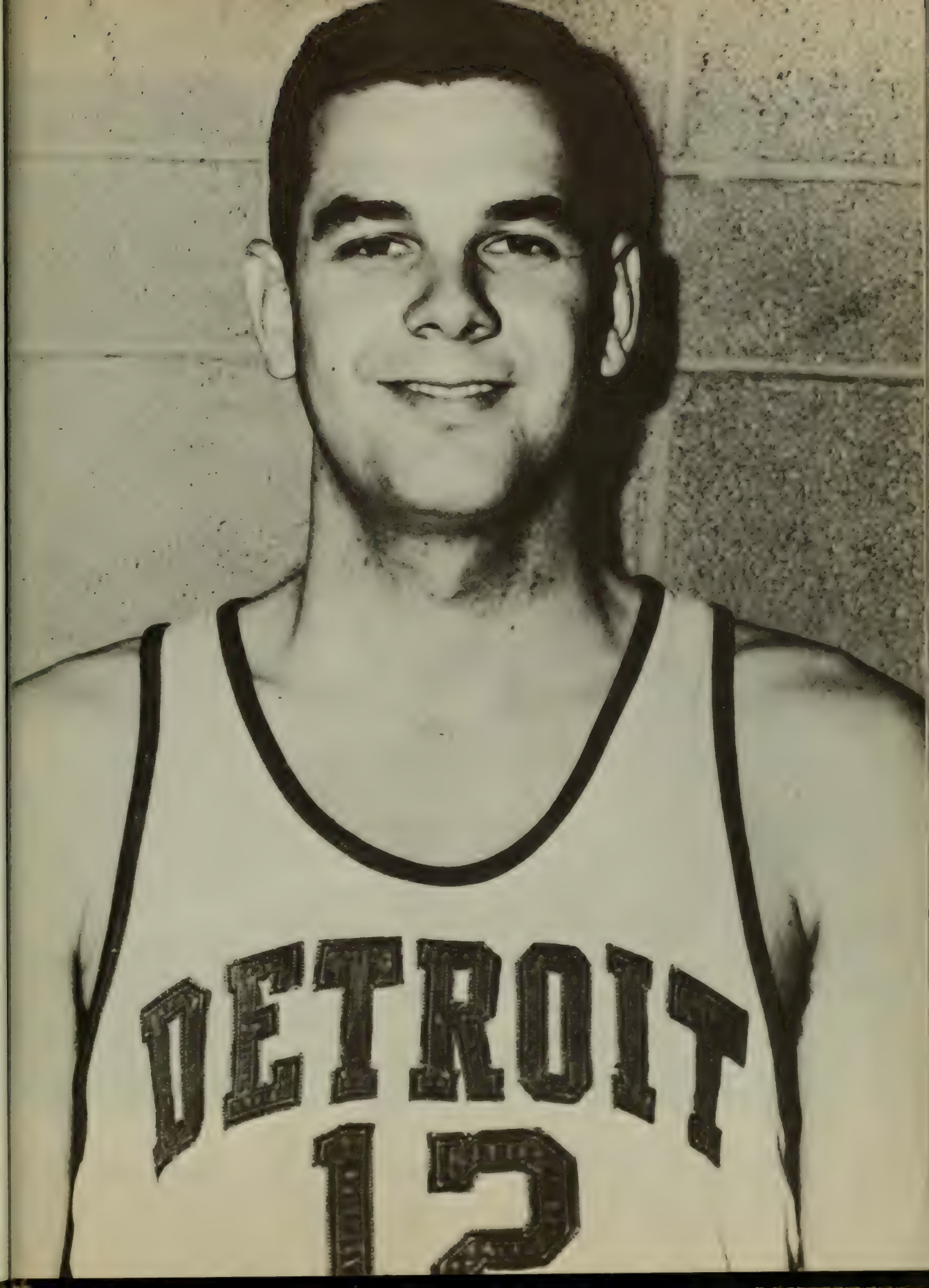
jumper or a soft little hook from the key, Lanier's shots were something beautiful to behold.

Naturally, the Pistons were eager to land the promising young college star. Already Lanier's college coaches were comparing him with Elvin "Big E" Hayes and the master himself — Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. The Pistons were just as impressed. So impressed, in fact, that they made Lanier their first-round draft choice in 1970.

As a rookie, Lanier showed steady signs of improvement, growing more and more impressive with each game. The Pistons, you see, had hired the great Bill Russell to tutor their prize pupil.

"I'm all for becoming a better all-around player," said Lanier. "One hates to hear that he's good only at this, but bad at something else."

Under Russell's firm hand, Lanier balanced his awesome offense with powerful Russell-style defense. The result? During





GRAND SLAM. Pistons forward Edgar Jones actually shattered a glass backboard with one of his powerful slam-dunks during his Continental Basketball Association days.

the 1973-74 season Lanier led the Pistons to a 52-30 record, their best ever in the NBA!

As the team steamrolled into the playoffs, Lanier and Bing were both scoring at will. Sure, the Pistons finally lost a heart-breaker to the Chicago Bulls, but the message went out: Lanier and the Pistons are for real!

"Lanier's improvement since I've become coach is monumental," Scott said. "He has learned to play both ends of the floor. This whole thing relates to him. If your big guy wants to work for you every night, you're a heckuva coach. If he doesn't, you're a bum."

Scott was far from a bum. Since taking over the coaching reins in 1972, he had been a consistent winner. His talents weren't overlooked by the NBA, which voted him the Coach of the Year in 1974.

Scott was a nervous man who fidgeted on the bench.

"I've always gotten nervous like this," he said. "When I was playing for the first time in a playoff game at Madison Square

***RUNS IN THE FAMILY.** Former Detroit coach Herb Brown's brother Larry used to coach the Denver Nuggets and New Jersey Nets.*

Garden, everyone else was acting real calm. I was so scared I put my shirt on backwards!"

Lanier and his teammates respected their nervous leader. So, when the Pistons management hired Herb Brown to replace Scott midway through the 1975-76 season, you could hear the grumbling all the way across the Great Lakes. There was trouble in the Motor City.

GRIPES AND MORE GRIPES

Though the Pistons didn't get along with him, Coach Herb Brown did make it possible for the team to score more points and win more ball games, and that's what counted most.

In 1976-77, Brown's first full season at the helm, the Pistons chalked up a winning record. Unfortunately, the season was more like a soap opera than anything else. The players would gripe at Brown; then Brown would gripe at the players. And the newspapers recorded every little spat. It was sad to see outstanding players like Kevin Porter, Chris Ford, Eric Money and Bob Lanier fighting openly with their coach.





RARE FOUR-POINTER. Believe it or not, Isiah Thomas scored a four-point play. He was fouled while sinking a three-pointer, and went on to make the free throw.

What was the problem? Well, Brown yelled at the players, and they didn't like it. But that was just the way Brown was. The players resented him, partly because they didn't think he was qualified to be an NBA coach. His last two coaching positions had been with tiny C.W. Post College and the Israel Sabras in the European Professional Basketball League.

The Detroit players weren't too fond of Brown's tough New York accent, either. "I just don't like the way he sounds when he's criticizing me," Lanier said. "What he's saying may be right, but sometimes I just can't listen."

Obviously, some changes were in order. In 1978, Coach Brown left the team.

In 1980, Lanier left, too. He was traded to the Milwaukee Bucks.

Lanier's shoes (size 19!) would be tough to fill. Oddly enough, it would be a cat-quick little rookie by the name of Isiah Thomas who would provide the fireworks in Big Bob's absence.

FORTUNE IN SNEAKERS. The Converse shoe company paid Isiah Thomas \$100,000 to wear Converse shoes during the 1982-83 season!

ROOKIE OF THE YEAR

At 6'1", 185 pounds, Isiah Thomas seemed too small to play the role of savior to a sagging club. But Thomas, barely 20-years-old, could do it all.

"I believe God made people to perform certain arts," said Will Robinson, a Pistons administrative assistant. "Frank Sinatra was made to sing, Jesse Owens was made to run and Isiah Thomas was made to play basketball."

And how! Thanks to Thomas and another great rookie, Kelly Tripucka, the Pistons improved to 39-43 in 1981-82 after posting a dismal 21-61 mark in 1980-81.

Thomas proved to be a quality person off the floor, too. The first thing you notice about him is his toothy grin which stretches from ear to ear. He smiles a lot these days. Maybe he realizes how lucky he is.

Thomas was one of nine children in a very poor family. At times Isiah's family had very little food in the cupboard. Out on the street, life on Chicago's tough West Side wasn't much fun.





DOWN IN THE MOUTH. Edgar Jones, number 42 for the Pistons, is a great leaper with an excellent sense of timing for blocked shots, but he has paid a price for mixing it up under the boards. In 1977 he lost three teeth to elbows while scrapping for UN-Reno.

"There were people who got shot and stabbed and all that stuff," Isiah recalls. "I appreciate it even more now. Take something like shoes. You take care of them better because when you were young and got a pair, they had to last for a year or two. Or three meals a day. I know everybody doesn't get that."

When Isiah was four-years-old, his father left the family. Alone, Isiah's mother struggled to make ends meet. To feed her family, she relied on leftovers, discarded by the cafeteria where she worked.

Isiah calls her "the greatest woman in the world." But she says it was Isiah who gave her strength.

"Even now I'll wake up at midnight and give him a call," says Isiah's mom. "I was kind of like his first coach. I'd always talk to him and wherever I went, he went. We walked and talked many a day together when he was younger. He probably didn't understand what I was saying, but he looked up at me like he did."

Isiah understood, alright. He loved his mother deeply and appreciated what she was trying to do for him.

SIZE 10, PLEASE. Isiah Thomas donates dozens of pairs of shoes and basketballs to neighborhood playgrounds and his former high school.

As young Isiah grew up, he stayed away from the street scene. He chose instead to play basketball at the local Boys Club.

"I played every day," Isiah recalls. "I studied a little bit, too, but at night I would go to the Boys Club. When I was in the fifth grade, the Club would close at 5:30 for the younger kids, but I'd sneak into the shower and hide. The older kids would get in at 6:30 and I'd sneak out and play with them until 9:00."

The practice paid off.

Isiah went on to star at St. Joseph's High School, leading the team to a 73-15 record over three years. Naturally, college scouts throughout the country flocked to Chicago to recruit the flashy playmaker, but Isiah had already made up his mind. He would attend Indiana and play for Bobby Knight, a great college coach.

At Indiana, Isiah wasted no time. He led the Hoosiers to an NCAA championship his sophomore year. Then he shocked the Indiana fans by announcing that he intended to quit college and play for the NBA.





BREAKFAST OF CHAMPIONS. *Kelly Tripucka says he eats (you guessed it) Wheaties for breakfast.*

It was a tough decision, but Isiah wanted to help his family.

"It was the security I needed for me, my family and the family I plan to start someday," he explained. "I know the value of a degree, but I can always go back to school."

He has plans to do just that. "You can only play basketball so long," he says. "Then you have 35 or 40 more years to do something else with your life."

Thomas is headed in the right direction, and so are the Pistons.

TRIPUCKA HELPS OUT

In the early spring of the 1981-82 season, it appeared that Isiah would be the runaway winner of the Rookie of the Year award. He was scoring lots of points and winning lots of fans with his friendly smile.

But then another rookie started to shine. Kelly Tripucka, a lanky 6'6", 220-pound Notre Dame forward, was taken by the Pistons in the same draft with Isiah. No one thought he would be an immediate hit, but Kelly proved the doubters wrong.

BENSON'S BASS. Pistons center Kent Benson is a great bass fisherman. He landed a 10-pounder and an 11-pounder in 1982!

Playing in the same line-up with Isiah, Kelly almost snatched Rookie of the Year honors for himself. While startled reporters were still learning how to spell T-R-I-P-U-C-K-A, Kelly was pouring in points like a veteran all-star. Night after night he was everywhere on the floor — snagging rebounds, diving for loose points and pouring in the points. Kelly surprised everyone the night he burned Doctor J for 38 points as Detroit destroyed the powerful Philadelphia 76ers, 124-101.

"It's funny," said Kelly. "People didn't take me seriously. From the time I joined the NBA, I was labeled a loser. People said I wasn't quick enough. I wasn't tall enough. They said I was just a college hotshot who thought I was good enough to play with Julius Erving and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar."

As it turned out, it was Kelly's inner desire that launched him to the heights of the all-time NBA greats.

"He's got a heart as big as Dallas," explained Detroit coach Scotty Robertson. "Give Kelly the ball and he'll challenge anybody."





LUCK OF THE IRISH? It was more skill than luck. Kelly Tripucka led Notre Dame to a four-year 92-26 record and four NCAA Tournament bids!

Sure, Kelly knows he has limitations. "I'm not a great player or anything," he admits. "But I'm the kind of player who plays hard every night at both ends of the floor and does whatever he can to win."

Kelly fits the description of the All-American boy. He was raised in a close-knit athletic family in a pleasant New Jersey neighborhood. Three of his brothers played college basketball and another played college football. His father had been a quarterback at Notre Dame and also in the pros.

While growing up, Kelly spent most of his time in the backyard, dribbling against his brothers. It was here that he learned what real competition was all about.

"We played 3-on-3," he recalls with a smile. "We never finished one of the games. A fight always broke out and then the old man would have to run out and chase us with a rake to break it up. We tried to outdo each other in a game, but we are really close as a family."

FORE! Bill Laimbeer is a little taller than the average guy, so he has to have custom-made clubs made for his favorite hobby — golf. They seem to work, too. In 1982, big Bill took first place in a benefit tournament in Cleveland.

After high school, Kelly followed in his father's footsteps by enrolling at Notre Dame. There, he led the Irish to four winning seasons before being drafted by the Pistons.

Today, Kelly says he enjoys living in Detroit. He says the Motor City fans are special, and that he is fortunate to be playing alongside Isiah Thomas and the rest of his Pistons teammates.

Kelly lives near the Silverdome, where the Pistons play their games. In his spare time he enjoys cruising around Detroit in his Corvette. The fans wave, and Kelly honks his horn and smiles. For Kelly Tripucka, playing pro basketball for the Pistons is the good life. He only hopes it will continue.

"What do you think when you are compared to Celtics legend John 'Hondo' Havlicek?" someone once asked Kelly.

"If I can accomplish only half of what John Havlicek did during his years in the NBA, I'll be very, very happy," he answered. "Havlicek is one of the all-time greats who is maybe the best small forward to play the game. When people compare me to him, I tingle inside."





DOUBLE HONOR. Isiah Thomas and Kelly Tripucka were both named to the NBA's All-Rookie Team in 1982.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

With Tripucka and Thomas, the Pistons have the heart and soul of many great teams to come. In 1982-83, they almost made the playoffs, before just falling short.

The rest of the league take note: The Pistons have some talented guards to go with Isiah Thomas. John Long is a dead-eye from downtown, and Vinnie Johnson gives the Pistons heavy hustle off the bench.

At center, the team features 6-11 Bill Laimbeer who has really come into his own. Laimbeer fizzled with the Cleveland Cavaliers, but improved dramatically with Detroit. As far as Bill was concerned, the Pistons had shown faith in him, and he wasn't about to let them down.

"I've always felt that my time was my time, whether I just wanted to travel or just lie around and do nothing," says Laimbeer. "Basketball never entered into it. But after I came to

THE DAY THE FANS STAYED HOME. *The Detroit fans are among the most loyal in the NBA. There was one particular day in 1967, however, when the fans stayed home. That day the Pistons played in front of only 1,211 rooters — the smallest crowd in franchise history.*

Detroit and everyone showed such confidence in me, I felt I had to do something to repay them.”

With such a positive attitude, Laimbeer has blossomed. His rebounding and scoring are both up — and this gives the rest of the Pistons something to shoot for.

“I don’t know about the future, but I want to do something, like be a top-10 rebounder,” says Laimbeer. “Everyone has said I can’t do this or that. I want to show them I can.”

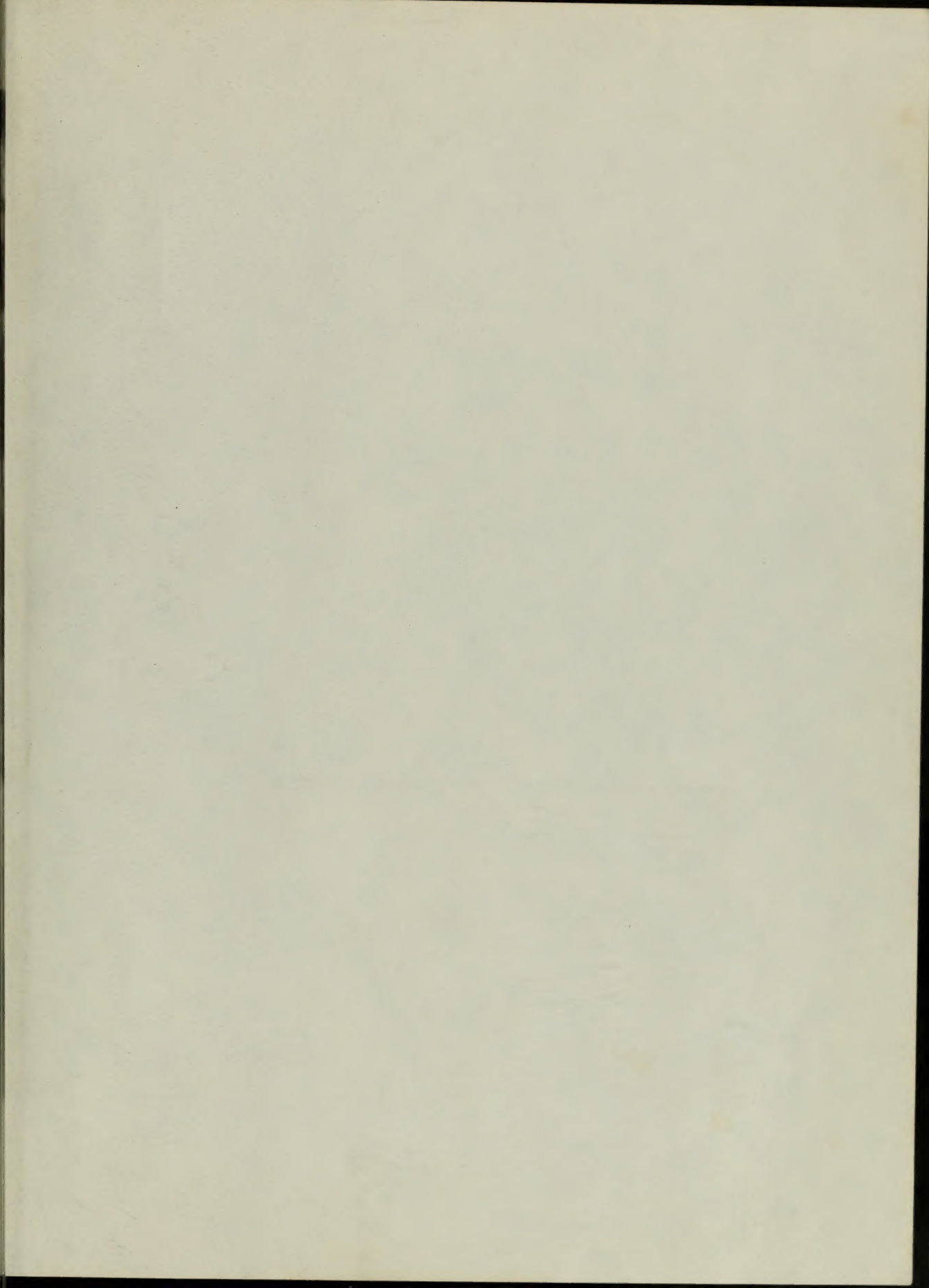
Isiah Thomas has even higher goals for himself and the Pistons.

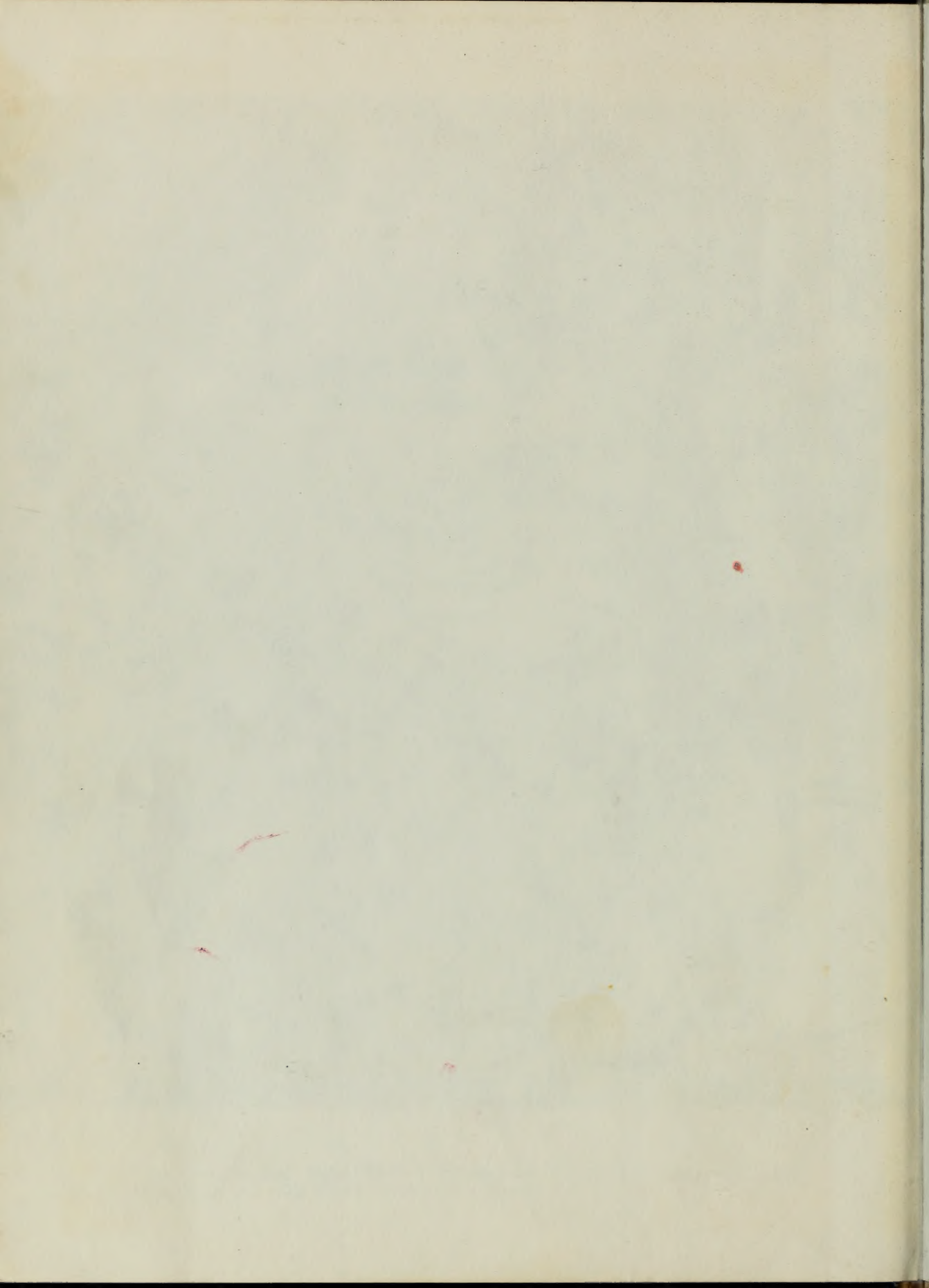
“Once I’m done playing basketball, when people mention Bob Cousy and Nate Archibald and the other great point guards, I want them to mention Isiah, too,” he says. “They say shoot for the moon and if you don’t make it, the worst thing that you can do is fall on a star. So I’m shooting for the moon.”

After thirty years, the fabulous Pistons are still flying high!









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